

Homegrown online assessments prove invaluable to one district



online-assessments

[1]Assessments are critical to our efforts to improve instruction in K-12 education. Yet, in an age when students are accessing a vast array of resources on computers, tablets, and mobile devices, some school districts are still hesitant to take their assessments online.

At [Hopewell Valley Regional School District](#) [2] (HVRSD), we began the transition to online assessment more than three years ago. Across the district, our teachers have created a number of online assessments—individually and through their work in professional learning communities—for use in our district. Since then, we've found that online assessments offer several distinct advantages over

paper-and-pencil assessments.

1. Online assessment saves teachers' time.

When I was a teacher and administered paper-and-pencil assessments, I'd have to distribute and collect the tests, grade them, record the grades, and then figure out how to follow up with instruction. Depending on the number of students and my workload, a day or even a week, could go by before I had all the information I needed to plan my instruction.

In contrast, with an online test, the scores are automatically calculated and recorded for each student. And since we can view students' results as soon as they finish the test, we can immediately target our instruction, interventions, or enrichment based on their performance. It helps make our instructional time with students more productive.

2. It makes student thinking visible.

Online assessment helps our teachers take a deeper look at how students perform on assessments. Instead of seeing only a total score, we can now easily see how students respond to each question.

We use an assessment and data management system called [Performance Matters](#) [3] to develop, administer, and score formative assessments tied to state and Common Core standards. With this system, we can view the most commonly chosen incorrect answer and see how many students selected that answer. We can also look at each student's performance on each question and gauge his or her understanding of a specific benchmark or standard.

This gives us much more insight into students' thought processes. There simply aren't enough hours in the day for a teacher to gather this level of detail by hand for each assessment.

3. It allows teachers to quickly make instructional decisions.

When I was a classroom teacher, I liked to use our assessment and data management system to conduct short online assessments in the classroom or for homework to instantly gauge student understanding. For example, for a unit on short stories, I asked students to read a story and answer five questions online for homework. I then logged onto the system that night to see how they did, so I could plan my instruction for the next day. Because I could instantly see the most commonly chosen incorrect answers, I could gear my instruction to address why they made those errors. Having this data also helped me differentiate my instruction to address the needs of individuals or groups of students.

4. It establishes a record of student progress for more meaningful conversations.

We use the data from our online assessments in a variety of ways, including parent/teacher conferences, Intervention and Referral Services meetings, and Individualized Education Plan meetings. When we have a record of student progress that goes beyond the numbers in a gradebook, we can have more meaningful conversations about student growth. We can clearly illustrate each student's progress against our state standards and how it compares with other students in the class, school, or district. Using this data to frame our conversations helps us to be productive with our time and sharpen the focus on students' strengths and areas of need.

5. It helps us better address students' needs across the performance spectrum.

Whether students are participating in our gifted and talented program or special education program, it's essential to have current, objective data to support recommendations for academic enrichment, support, or intervention. Online assessments give us the data we need to make decisions that support the individual needs of our students — and illustrate to parents why we've made those decisions or recommendations for their children.

6. It develops test-taking skills for PARCC and other high stakes tests.

Because our students know exactly what to expect from online assessments, they're better prepared to take the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers) Assessment online. At the school and district levels, we're also better prepared because we've had time to identify and address any technology needs. When you have more than 1,000 students simultaneously taking a test, you need to know things like whether your server can support that or not, and if there are enough computers in the building. Online assessments helped us discover how to make the best use of our resources.

Overall, we've found online assessment to be an extremely valuable tool. It saves time and improves efficiency. More importantly, it allows us to gather more information than ever about our students' understanding of what we're teaching, which has made a big difference in the effectiveness of our instruction.

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